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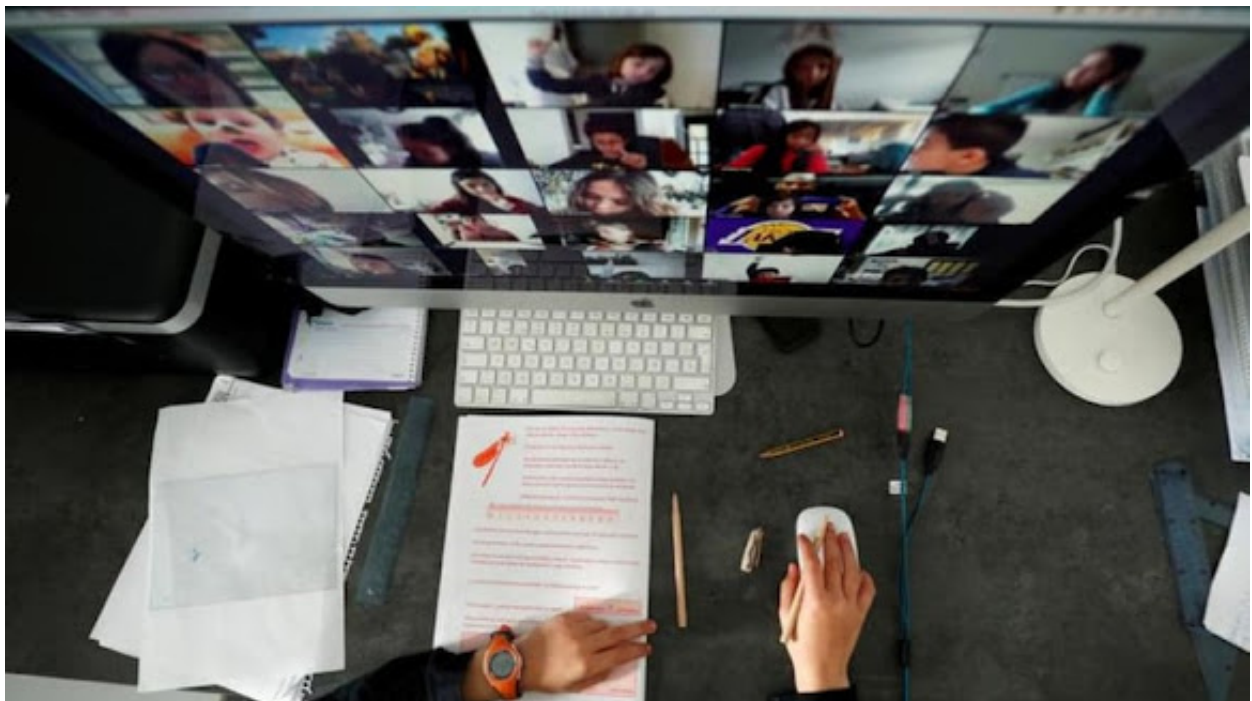
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DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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– **Banhishikha Ghosh**



Source: India Today

The COVID-19 induced global health crisis has affected social researchers, sociologists and social anthropologists in particular, in myriad ways. Ethnography (and in some cases participant observation), is a *sine qua non* to undertake qualitative research in these two social science disciplines. Ethnography involves immersed research through 'the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution' (Simpson & Coleman, 2017). Many researchers today are facing impediments to go to the field due to local, national or international border restrictions. Others who may be already in the field are still unable to conduct their research due to state-imposed safety regulations. For a few researchers who still can access the field, the contagious nature of COVID-19 poses a huge threat to them and their interlocutors. The problem is even more intense for early career stage researchers situated within this 'political economy of knowledge' (Nagar, 2014) who engage in time-bound research with limited funding.

The challenge for many researchers now is to conduct their academic research despite not being able to access the 'field' regularly physically. As the pandemic impedes into their fieldwork plans, the prospect of continued ethnographic research seems uncertain. A growing number of medical experts and observers believe that we might never return to the 'normal', leading many social anthropologists to indicate that long-term 'traditional' fieldwork could become an impossibility in the coming years (Günel et al., 2020). Researchers are, therefore re-inventing their methods to continue their research (Miller, 2018). To manage such a crisis during 'new-normal', social anthropologists are gradually coming up with novel responses including 'patchwork ethnography' (Günel et al., 2020) and nuanced 'online ethnography' (Miller, 2020).

It is in this context that the need for research-based on digital ethnography becomes imperative in the contemporary world. Unlike conventional ethnography, digital ethnography involves analysing social constructions of cultural life through online virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2012). It is significant to note that the improvement in digital mediums of communication and interaction has been impacting the ethnographic techniques and processes we are engaged with since the last few decades (Hjorth et al. 2017). In the case of digital ethnography, the nature of the contact that the ethnographer shares with interlocutors is mediated rather than direct (Pink et al., 2016).

Such mediated research can result in four types of practices: a) developing innovative professional practices through digital tools to network and build conversations; b) researching how people are using digital media, technologies and tools; c) analysing with the help of digital tools; d) engaging in the critical analysis of the use and consequences of digital media (Lupton, 2015). Such practices have challenged the existing conceptual and analytical categories. At the same time, such practices are also important as 'the relations between social life and its analysis are changing in the context of digitisation' (Marres, 2013). Doing digital research offers us a way to address such changes.

However, it is important to remember at the same time that digital ethnography is not a research 'method' or technique which is bounded, having a distinct beginning and end (Pink et al., 2015). Rather it is processual, and it makes us realise that ethnographic immersion is a possibility even in a context where the space of interaction does not have a concrete physical grounding (Hine, 2000). In the case of conventional ethnographies, there was a distinct break between the 'field' and the 'home' where the field was a bounded space and time. And an exit from the field meant a rupture in the relationship with the interlocutors (Miller, 2018). However, in the case of digital research, ethnographers have the capacity to retain relationships over distance. Today for a large section of people, their devices (phones/computers) are an inalienable part of their selves. Hence, digital ethnography can be used to conduct nuanced in-depth research through long and sustained conversations with interlocutors over virtual chat and video calling platforms. Such platforms provide an exclusive space for both the researcher and the interlocutor to express their thoughts and narratives without the fear of external intervention. Such discussions also allow the researchers to overcome the challenges of travelling long distances and facilitates them to talk to two interlocutors consecutively who may be situated in different spaces. It is important here to establish rapport with the interlocutors to avoid getting concocted data.

Further, the pandemic constrains the movement of a large section of people who are stuck in their homes now. Such constraints in movement facilitate researchers and interlocutors to build stronger ties over a larger period. However, it is important for a researcher to be empathetic towards interlocutors who themselves might be in stress/ pressure due to the

pandemic. Doing digital ethnography during a pandemic, therefore requires a researcher to be extremely alert, self-reflexive and sensitive.

Digital ethnography also challenges the entire idea that ethnographers 'go out to confront the radically unknown . . . rendering it understandable, indeed probable' (Howell, 2017: 18). Rather, since digital ethnography is often multi-sighted, it facilitates researchers to pursue research across more than one connected sites (Marcus, 1995). Online ethnography construes the field as a network of interconnected sites (Burrell, 2009), explores the messy webs of interconnection across online and offline spaces (Pink et al. 2016) and participates in multiple frames of meaning-making (Varis, 2014). While some scholars consider digital ethnography as a break from the conventional ethnographic tradition, others feel that digital field sites and fieldwork represent continuity rather than rupture with previous ethnographic practice (Hjorth et al., 2017).

There are five key principles for doing digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016):

- a) Multiplicity: There are several ways to engage with the digital, and all these ways have a clear impact on the research, the interlocutors and the researcher (Pink et al., 2016: 8).
- b) Non-digital-centricness: It has to be remembered that even when research is conducted online, relationships cannot be purely digital, so it is important to look beyond it to understand how relationships are played out.
- c) Openness: Openness and flexibility is the major feature of digital research design. And it is shaped in relation to the particular research questions, institutional contexts and ways in which the participants in the research engage with it (Pink et al., 2016: 11)
- d) Reflexivity: It is a crucial element in any social-anthropological research, and digital ethnography is no different. Digital ethnographers theorise and encounter the world as a digital-material-sensory environment and reflexively engage in asking how we produce knowledge (Pink et al., 2016: 12).
- e) Unorthodox: Digital ethnography acknowledges and seeks out ways of developing knowledge about social realities that might otherwise be invisible and unanticipated. Thus, the digital ethnographic approach enables us to go beyond academia, beyond disciplines and beyond the standard written

production of academic scholarship (Pink et al., 2016: 13).

Cocq (2019) argues that doing digital ethnography involves addressing three basic questions:

- a) Where: The first step is to identify the location from where the researcher wants to collect data;
- b) How: The second step is to decide the selection of interlocutors. Such choices and the patterns of selection should be linked to research objectives;
- c) Who: Finally, the researcher should locate the interlocutor and make him/her aware of the objectives of research and thereby addresses issues of ethics and ownership.

Cocq thus argues that identifying the routes and places (the *where*), the value of documentation (the *how*) and the key role of research subjects (the *who*) are therefore primary to do digital ethnographic research.

It is important to note here that digital ethnography can have many limitations. One of the major one is the Hawthorne effect or the observer effect (which refers to change in the behaviour of the interlocutor due to being observed in an online space). The second deals with the nature of data collected due to restrictions on observation brought about by online presence. To limit these challenges, it is important to remember that digital ethnography can be combined with other ways of 'being there' (Geertz, 1973; Pink et al., 2016). Offline or online modes of presence or copresence mediated virtually through online phone, or video calls can be specifically helpful here. It is important to understand the linkages between different online and offline spaces and between different online activities (Hine, 2017: 317).

Today our digital presence has become a way of living our lives; it is not just a mode of communication but a way of presenting our embodied selves to other people. It is an infrastructure for our social existence and is often taken for granted reality (Hine, 2000). It is also important to remember that while digital ethnography cannot completely counteract all the challenges brought forward to ethnographic practice 'at home', yet it can guide us to make further enquiries into global structures and locations of power, cultural practices and social phenomena (Góralaska, 2020: 50). Today ethnographic

practices are being reconstructed and renegotiated as the 'desk has collapsed into the field' (Mosse, 2006: 937) due to the pandemic. In such times, digital ethnographic practices can provide a viable option for doing thick, analytical and descriptive research (Beneito-Montagut et al., 2017).

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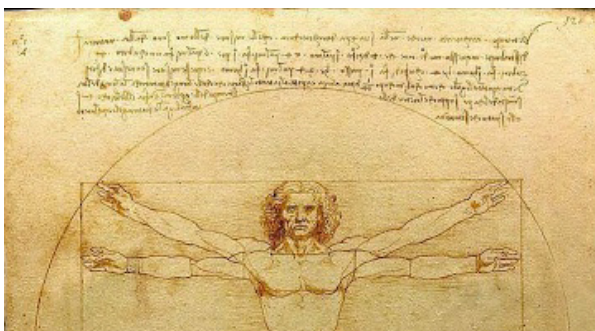




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